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Critical Pedagogy: An Evaluation and a Direction for Reformulation

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ABSTRACT

Critical pedagogy, once the prominent new paradigm in educational discourse, is practically absent from it now. Many writers attribute this to its lack of practical consequences. In this article, however, the authors investigate its underlying model of personal identity as an aim of education. This model, with its emphasis on consistency and rationality as a source of human agency, is a typical product of the “modern” way of thinking. In the light of the discussion of postmodernity, it can no longer be taken for granted. It is suggested that another model, based on a discursive theory of identity along Vygotskian lines, may present more adequate possibilities for specifying the aims of education. One aspect of critical pedagogy should not be lost, however, that is, its emphasis on the political nature of education and the necessity of an ethical discourse about its aims.

INTRODUCTION

Emancipatory-critical pedagogy (or critical pedagogy for short) is a relatively young “paradigm” in thinking about education. It derives both its name and its basic conceptualizations and interests from the so-called critical theory, the sociological and philosophical theory of the neo-Marxist Frankfurt School, which originated around 1930. In the 1970s it was hailed by many as a viable and vigorous alternative to both the nomological and the interpretive traditions in the social sciences, especially in the field of education. The first proponents of critical pedagogy were Germans like Klafki, Mollenhauer, and Lempert, but similar theories rapidly developed in the Anglo-American area. Critical pedagogy was considered by many to be, if not the ultimate, at least the best available paradigm for education, synthesizing (according to its own pretensions) all previous approaches with a clear critique of the societal conditions of education.

The position of critical pedagogy at this moment, however, is quite different from these expectations. In the relatively short period since it originated, critical pedagogy has met with fierce criticism. For instance, on June 9, 1993, the prominent German educationalist Jürgen Oelkers published an article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, a daily newspaper. This contribution was entitled “Sentenced to Education. After Twenty-Five Years: The Effects of Emancipatory Pedagogy” (Oelkers 1993). His assessment of emancipatory pedagogy was really something. He characterized it as a mishmash of moral judgments and experiment, based on the one hand on critical ideas about society and on the other on an abstract idea of the child, reminiscent of Rousseau. According to Oelkers, it deals with the nature of the child as a construct of general liberation, but hardly with actual children. Because of the emphasis on “the nature of the child” and on the “societal liberation,” emancipatory pedagogy comes close to the position of the progressive (reform) pedagogy of the first decades of this century. The special “strength” of emancipatory pedagogy, according to Oelkers, is its negative attitude.

Although Oelkers’s analysis is especially directed at the theoretical tradition in postwar Western European pedagogy generally called anti-authoritarian pedagogy, which is only a part of the broader stream of critical-pedagogical thinking, it is indicative of the deluge of criticism directed at many aspects of critical pedagogy. The greater part of this criticism was directed at its (supposed) lack of practical results. We will say more about this criticism later. For now, it is sufficient to say that for this and other reasons, of which the waning interest in Marxist theory after the fall of the Soviet Union is not the least, critical pedagogy is now considered by many to have been a stillborn child that is interesting mainly for historical reasons. The very few remaining proponents of critical pedagogy are almost seen as relics of bygone times. In the postmodern era, its preoccupation with emancipation and the wrongs of society seems outdated.

As we will explicate below, some of the basic categories of critical pedagogy are indeed founded in a typically “modern” way of thinking and ought to be revised in a fairly fundamental way—as some of its adherents, such as Giroux and McLaren, have been doing. Our analysis, however, is not directed at the practical results of critical pedagogy or at its analysis of contemporary society and its pedagogical problems, but at its basic pedagogical categories: the way it conceptualizes personal identity as the aim of education.

To develop such a pedagogical critique of critical pedagogy, we first position and contextualize this pedagogy as to its origin in critical theory, its aim, and as a form of criticism. Our interest in this venture derives from our conviction that the orientation—the commitment—of critical pedagogy is still valuable, that is, its explicitly taking into account, both theoretically and practically, the (societal) political nature of education and pedagogy. Our thesis, however, is that this commitment has not been adequately translated into a valid pedagogical theory. In the conclusion, we

will indicate in what direction we can go for a reformulation that preserves this commitment, by elaborating a Vygotskian point of view.

THE COMMITMENT OF CRITICAL THEORY

Critical theory, the philosophy that critical pedagogy takes as its point of reference, is a reflection on the relation between individual and society, developed from a neo-Marxist point of view. Its central anthropological contention is that everyone has a real interest in a rational and reasonably organized society. However, it rejects the Hegelian view on which history itself develops according to a transcendental principle. For critical theory, history is a basic category; if anything is to warrant a course of history in the direction of a more rational society, it must be a principle immanent in history. Marx claimed to have formulated exactly such a principle. After World War II, however, Horkheimer and Adorno lost their optimism about the development of societies in a more rational direction. Their former view of history as a process of enlightenment, of increasing liberation from and control over nature, had been turned upside down. Rational reflection as a means of controlling nature has become a goal in itself and thereby has turned against the interests of humanity. Rationality has become purely instrumental rationality, a technological power relation. Individual and collective do not have a grip on, and are powerless against, a world controlled by the truncated rationality of the sciences. The dialectic of enlightenment is a threat to human beings and to humanity as such (Horkheimer and Adorno 1987).

Horkheimer and Adorno agree that it is impossible to go back to a situation without technology or distance from nature. But what can form a counterweight for absolutistic power pretensions (Baars 1987, 66)? By the influence of the Enlightenment, the historical process of development has become irrational, so the principle of development immanent in history has been perverted. For the powerless individual hardly anything is left. For Horkheimer, only nostalgia and hope remain. Adorno points to the possibility of anger about such a total negativity. Sublimated in reflection, it can become a power for resistance. Adorno concludes that we may find this source in art and in theory as the only existing forms of critical praxis. He points to theory and art as forms of critique, that is, as ideology critique, which implies they leave out the practical-political actions completely.

Habermas has pointed in another direction in his voluminous work in which he deals with one central question: "What did go wrong with the rationalization process that went with the originating of the modern Western societies?" (Kunneman 1983, 7). To understand Habermas's commitment, we quote him from an interview.

I have a conceptual motive and a fundamental intuition. This, by the way, refers back to religious traditions such as those of the Protestant or Jewish mystics, also to

Schelling. The motivating thought concerns the reconciliation of a modernity which has fallen apart, the idea that without surrendering the differentiation that modernity has made possible in the cultural, the social and economic spheres, one can find forms of living together in which autonomy and dependency can truly enter into a non-antagonistic relation, that one can walk tall in a collectivity that does not have the dubious quality of backward-looking substantial forms of community. The intuition springs from the sphere of relations with others; it aims at experiences of undisturbed intersubjectivity. These are more fragile than anything that history has up till now brought forth in the way of structures of communication—an ever more dense and finely woven web of intersubjective relations that nevertheless make possible a relation between freedom and dependency that can only be imagined with interactive models. Wherever these ideas appear, whether in Adorno [. . .], in Schelling's *Weltalter*, in the young Hegel, or in Jakob Böhme, they are always ideas of felicitous interaction, of reciprocity and distance, of separation and of successful, unspoiled nearness, of vulnerability and complementary caution. (Dews 1986, 125)

In the course of Western history, intersubjectivity and preservation have given way to control and conquest. It is the task of a critical theory of society to make such changes visible and to criticize them, contributing in this way to a rationalization (in a broader sense) so that the original order may be reestablished—the way from chaos to harmony (cf. Keulartz 1992).

Habermas has tackled the problem of finding a principle immanent in history that can at least guide our actions toward the rationalization of modern Western societies by moving along two ways: first, with the help of an anthropology of knowledge, better known as the theory of knowledge-constitutive interests, and second, after his linguistic turn, with his embracing theory of communicative action.

In his anthropology of knowledge, Habermas (1971) strongly connects to the early Frankfurt School. It is his contention that, in striving for a technically perfect control over nature, we have lost the capacity to listen to and to preserve nature. In *Knowledge and Human Interests*, he focuses on the sciences and their anthropological embeddedness in society, and especially on the rationalization that finds its expression in the concept of a critical science. Such a critical science, according to Habermas, is an empirical science with a hermeneutical and a critical complement. The modi of explanation (information), understanding (interpretation), and societal critique (analysis) presuppose each other in a critical science. A critical science is directed toward an equilibrium of control, consensus, and critique. To put it differently, critical science is a force of rationalization because empirics, normativity, and criticism are reconciled in an integrative conception of science.

The anthropology of knowledge was first of all an epistemological exercise to tackle the problem of the quasi-transcendental status of the knowledge-constitutive interests. In *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Habermas characterizes the societal process of rationalization as the movement of the self-reflection of a macrosubject (cf. Habermas 1971, 62, 63). But with his theory of communicative action (Habermas 1987–1991), Habermas makes a move from a subject philosophical paradigm to an intersub-

jective position. No longer is the relation of the subject to himself central, but the relation of one subject to another is the issue at stake. Objectification and instrumentalization are then interpretable as distortions of communicative action, and as a sign for distorted symmetrical relations. All communication presupposes mutual understanding and consensus as its aim. This idea of universal mutual understanding is intrinsic to language. We received this quasi-empirical gift with our life form. On the basis of this precondition for communication, Habermas formulates the regulative ideal of the ideal speech situation. With it, expression is given to a particular view of society. Everyone should be able to take part in a societal discourse or should be able to start such a discourse. Further, all should be able to give legitimations of their actions and should be able to challenge the legitimations given by others (Miedema 1994a).

Central to the theory of communicative action is the theoretical distinction between system and lifeworld. The lifeworld constitutes a reservoir of interpretations, of unproblematic background beliefs actualized in communicative action by means of validity claims. Systems may be described as self-regulating contexts of action, coordinated around specific media such as money and power. The systems like economy and the state have a relieving function in relation to the lifeworld and are, in that sense, a factor in the rationalization of the lifeworld. Systems, however, may penetrate the lifeworld so that power and financial gains, rather than the orientation toward understanding and consensus, become of central importance. In such a case, the systems colonize the lifeworld (cf. Miedema 1994b). Normative criticism against this colonization by the systems can be articulated only from within the lifeworld, because only there, according to Habermas, will we find the locus of the quasi-empirical gift for mutual understanding.

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND ITS VARIETIES

Having positioned critical theory—the early Frankfurt School variant and Habermas’s double design of this theory—we will now consider some related versions of critical *pedagogy*.

Inspired by the approach of critical theory, critical pedagogy concerns itself with the question of the social embeddedness of education and its inevitably political character in contemporary Western society. It shares the conviction that all educational processes are essentially historical, and that the history of modern Western society has led to a situation where the results of education cannot be anything but problematical. The structure of our society is such that current educational situations can only produce either a disharmonic and internally divided or an ideologically curtailed personality structure, depending on how one estimates the degree of dominance of hegemonial culture. The aim of education which other theories hold as a matter of course, the internally consistent person, can no longer be regarded as a factual or even possible result of education under society’s current conditions. In fact, education has deteriorated into *Halbbildung*

(semi-education) (Sünker 1994). Transmission of knowledge has displaced personality formation as the aim of education. Its primary function is to ensure the production of persons who fit into existing societal structures. Thus, critical theorists are pessimistic about the possibilities of education in our society. They see existing education primarily as a means for continuing suppression, not as a means for individual self-realization. Critical theory inspired a wealth of studies and theories in the sociology of education which underpin this thinking.

The theoretically important point in all this is not simply that historical processes have put the education of mankind into danger. Rather, it is that history itself has become the basic category of the theory, and transcendental principles of personality development are rejected. In this respect, it differs fundamentally from other pedagogical thought systems. Generally, these have supposed that some universal principle is at work, the normal result of which is that every human being forms an identity, that is, a self-conscious, consistent, and rational way of relating herself to the world in its actions. Politics, or the structures of society, only plays a role as accidental circumstances which may prohibit the full deployment of such principles, but are not seen as theoretically relevant for psychology or for educational theory.

The theorists of the progressive education movement (Reform pedagogy), for instance, strongly tended to understand personal identity in terms of a capacity innate in every individual, which only has to be discovered (Rousseau) or at most needs an adequate environment to be able to express itself. Consequently, education is limited to the creation of such environmental conditions. These conditions mainly concern a safe emotional climate in which the child is encouraged to engage in exploration, and a stimulating physical and social context in which exploration can lead to learning. Some of these theorists hold that personal identity will result more or less automatically from the (stimulated) growth of a principle innate in every human being. Seen in this way, identity is a "product of nature," and learning about the physical and social environment is made possible only by the development of this identity.

In Piaget's theory, this relation between human nature and environment has been reversed. Identity results from the continuous interaction (equilibration) of the actual level of development of the individual, on the one side, and the characteristics of the environment, on the other side. The more thinking and acting are tuned to the actual characteristics of the environment, the more consistent they will become. Thus, for Piaget, the fixed point that must ultimately warrant the consistency of action is found in the universal structure of reality, not (as in progressive pedagogy) in the structure of humanity.

German hermeneutic pedagogy (*Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik*) finds this Archimedean point in culture itself, that is, in its universal aspect. In this respect, it is the continuation of classical German humanist *Bildungstheorie*: "According to a standard encyclopedia of the Weimar period, 'Bildung' as a process begins with a unique 'individuality' which then develops into a 'formed or value-saturated personality' through hermeneutic inter-

action with the 'objective cultural values' transmitted by venerated texts. The outcome, also called 'Bildung,' is a personal state characterized by 'a certain universality, meaning richness of mind and person,' along with 'totality, meaning inner unity and firmness of character' " (Ringer 1993, 680ff.). Hermeneutic pedagogy widens the concept of "text" to imply any type of appeal that culture makes to humans. For it is culture that lifts humans above the state of animals, and liberates them from the coercion of given situations, thus making possible planned and insightful, rational behavior. It is the cultural construction of meaning that makes the development of person and identity possible as it is internalized. Learning and development are exclusively related to the hermeneutic relation between the individual and the "objective cultural values." Cultural meanings are not just instruments or competencies which a person does or does not know how to use; they actually are the formative elements for the person himself. Values and views that form the foundations of culture and society also come to underlie the individual's actions and judgments. On the other hand, identity is not imposed; it is not wholly heteronomous. Identity is seen as an active construction by the individual, who uses and transforms the culture she finds herself in. This implies that the cultural context determines the possibilities of the establishment of personal identity. It forms, so to speak, the "developmental substance" for identity formation.

In an even more pregnant way, this becomes visible in the theory of George Herbert Mead, who takes the social community rather than objective culture as the important factor. According to Mead, consciousness and self-awareness are social products. They consist of internalized social expectations (the "generalized other") that ultimately form the core of the person, the "self." With this theory, Mead emphatically opposes the philosophy of consciousness (which underlies, among others, the progressive education view), which holds that "the agency of the subject can only be maintained by keeping it in a sense 'pure' from external, socio-cultural influences" (Biesta 1994, 303).

The important step in critical pedagogy is its denial of the existence of a transcendental principle of personality formation. Still, the educational aim of the consistent and self-identical person as such is maintained in critical theory. It obtains the status not of an actual aim but of a counterfactual ideal. This is what "emancipation" really seems to be about: the realization of an educational ideal which under current circumstances in society is denied. Inevitably, as in general critical theory, the problem now becomes whether we can find some force or principle *immanent* in history which, although not guaranteed to yield the desired outcome, may at least guide our actions toward the realization of emancipation. The answers to this problem differ.

Cultural and Natural Niches

Many critical educationalists have adopted the view that, if it is contemporary capitalist Western culture that is corrupt and corrupting, it should be possible to find areas where this corrupting effect has not been able to

penetrate. The catchword here is “authenticity.” It is sought in two directions. Some educationalists think that such areas might be found where hegemonial capitalist culture has not totally dominated other Western cultures, for instance working-class culture, or in cultures that have been protected from Western influences, as in the “grass roots” of non-Western population groups. On the other hand, sometimes all culture is suspected of being corrupt, and the search then is for areas where society can only marginally penetrate or not penetrate at all the “nature of the child” which is the cornerstone of the antiauthoritarian and psychoanalytic critical pedagogies as criticized by Oelkers, or the body as opposed to mind. In each case, the starting point for liberation is found in manifestations of resistance: the resistance of oppressed groups in society against the domination of hegemonial culture, the resistance resulting from experiences of inconsistency and incompleteness that people can have in critical circumstances (Giroux 1983, 1989; Freire 1970, 1973, 1985), the opposition of an individual personality strengthened by a free education against the power of institutions (Von Braunmühl 1980; Miller 1980), or the resistance of the body to the “inscription” of coercion from society (McLaren 1995).

What such theories amount to is that they try to disengage education and personality formation from the actual course of history, because this course is valued negatively in the light of the ideal of personality consistency and identity. The danger inherent in such a course is the reintroduction of ahistoric and even transcendent principles, making the theoretical apparatus inconsistent.

Emancipatory Knowledge

A very different position in critical theory is that of Jürgen Habermas. His theory of knowledge-constitutive interests culminates in the idea of an emancipatory interest in knowledge. Every human being and hence every child must be given the possibility by way of analysis, criticism, and self-reflection to develop into a freely self-determining and rationally acting person. These possibilities for self-determination must not be limited by material power, ideologies, or prejudice. The concept of emancipation provides an anthropological model that is both dynamic and formal. A consequence of this formal character is a formal concept of child raising. Several definitions of emancipation have been given in critical pedagogy. Mollenhauer (1977), for instance, called emancipation in child raising the process by which young people are liberated from the conditions that restrict their autonomy and competence in self-reflection. In Lempert’s (1969) view, emancipation is the process of setting people free from the compulsion of material power, as well as from ideologies and prejudices, with the help of analysis, critique, and self-reflection. For Klafki (1970, 1971), at the individual level, child raising is aimed at self-reliance, self-responsibility, and self- and co-determination. Socially it is directed at sociability and solidarity.

In Habermas’s view, emancipation is a kind of social development that can also be interpreted as an edification process of the human species. If

the anthropological picture here is not static but dynamical, not material but formal, then in each and every historical societal situation it has to be decided what the content of the emancipation should be. Although this provides an openness to the actual use of the concept of emancipation, it causes at the same time a very pressing practical problem: how to realize emancipation on the concrete level of education as a process and as action. This is the problem that gave rise to the criticisms of critical education mentioned earlier, which focused on the problematical relationship of this pedagogical theory with pedagogical praxis. Even in the cradle of Western European critical pedagogy itself, West Germany, critical educationalists themselves, not without irony, have called it a philosophy of science without a science, and concluded that a concrete material object was absent. Critical pedagogy has been criticized as a pedagogy that stresses theory, that is merely capable of criticism, of producing a formal concept of child raising, but without being able to offer directions for action (cf. Blankertz 1978). In the 1980s, the growing criticism of this pedagogy in the Western European countries increased the pressure. The ultimate question was whether the founding metatheoretical concepts like "critique," "emancipation," "understanding" (*Verstehen*), and "action" could be developed in the direction of a fully fledged pedagogical paradigm. Central in the emancipation approach of critical pedagogy was the presupposition that pedagogical and political-societal emancipation can be realized by means of criticism. One of the core inadequacies of the emancipation approach, however, was the incapacity to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Going along this line no practical directions for action could be offered to practitioners. Precisely such directions were expected by practitioners in the schools. Even theoreticians concluded that a critical approach that can offer only critique, that is not able to give any directions for concrete practices, leaves the practitioners to their own resorts. Such a critical approach is in itself conservative (cf. Kamper 1978).

To avoid this pitfall, and thus to mediate between theory and practice, action research was promoted as the critical method par excellence for developing cooperation among all the parties involved: scientists, professional practitioners such as teachers, helpers, parents, and children. If critical pedagogy is to be seen as a theory of child raising with a direct, concrete relation to its flesh-and-blood subjects, then such a process of cooperation is necessary. We will not elaborate here on the worst-case reconstruction of critical action research (Miedema 1987), but just point to some conclusions. Cooperation processes in action research very often ran into serious problems. Communication problems frequently caused the discontinuation of projects. Reports of critical action research projects that have been completed, let alone have been successful, are rather rare. The praxis-alienation of critical pedagogy and the frequently negative pedagogical character of this pedagogy (i.e., critical pedagogy does not contribute in a constructive critical way to concrete pedagogical thinking and acting), and the failures around action research (perceived as the paradigmatical method of critical pedagogy), have been instrumental in the negative attitude toward critical pedagogy that now prevails.

Communication

Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action* gave a new impulse to critical pedagogy. As noted before, here he claims that there *is* indeed a principle immanent in history to guide our actions, or rather, this principle is immanent in language. The possibility of the formation of a consistent identity is not found within the individual but on the intersubjective level, in the supra-individual structures of language. This movement exactly parallels the movement of Piaget in relation to progressive pedagogy. We should recall that Piaget, too, postulates a formal and external principle, instead of the vitalistic appeal to an innate rudiment of personal identity. Thus, it is certainly no coincidence that Habermas makes extensive use of Piaget's developmental theories, generalizing his phase model of individual development to a model of the development of societies. As Young (1990, 15) writes: "It is our constant attempts to free ourselves from the limiting conditions of each epoch of our own self-formation that is the motive force of our history of humanity." According to this model, the "history of humanity" is, notwithstanding the pessimism of the earlier critical theorists, a progressive history of rationality. This does not imply a steady progression in any society: we should distinguish the *logic* of development from the empirical *dynamics* of the actual process. Habermas endorses the position that in our society, the structures of interaction in which individuals participate do not realize the ideals implicit in language use and are oppressing. Emancipation for Habermas is an abstract utopian ideal that expresses the need to do away with such structures. Thus, along the Habermasian line of legitimation, the aim of communicative competence in education is related to the regulative societal ideal of the "ideal speech situation." This ideal has a quasi-empirical or quasi-transcendental status, because, according to Habermas, there is not and will never be a society that meets this ideal. As soon as he tries to make this utopia more concrete, however, Habermas refers to the ideal of consistent personal identity. The structures of communication that individuals internalize being neither harmonious nor consistent, the implication for contemporary education is that, to reach individual rationality, the individual needs the competency to distance himself from internalized role positions and to reflect on and interpret these positions. Thus, identity no longer coincides with the internalized role patterns, the generalized other, but is elevated to a formal level. Identity presupposes distance from the Self and the ability to handle different, mutually inconsistent roles. The individual in contemporary society must learn not to play a role, but to play *with* roles.

Given this position, it becomes understandable that some critical pedagogues, like Klafki and Mollenhauer, have opted to declare "communicative competency" the new aim of education. For this, competency does not mean just being able to speak and write. It implies the competency for self-determination, for participation in democratic decisions, and for solidarity. This seems a fair description of the idea of identity. Like Habermas, Klafki and Mollenhauer give no more than formal explication of this universal aim of education. In concrete historical situations, the contents and

procedures will differ, as long as they can be shown to lead toward the ultimate goal. In their case, too, this goal is bound to the ideal of consistent personal identity.

Utopia

Another way of legitimation is given by Giroux. He wants to avoid every form of transcendentalism in a plea for a substantial position that takes the “materiality of human interaction” seriously, and wants to “move from criticism to substantive vision” (Giroux 1989, 37, 59). “(R)adical pedagogy needs to be informed by a passionate faith in the necessity of struggling to create a better world. In other words, radical pedagogy needs a vision—one that celebrates not what is but what could be, that looks beyond the immediate to the future and links struggle to a new set of human possibilities. This is a call for a concrete utopianism” (Giroux 1983, 242). In relation with his concrete utopia, Giroux speaks of a politics of hope, a language of possibility and morality. Instead of the quasi-transcendental ideal speech situation, Giroux’s criterion is the project to be realized, the world of the “not yet,” because of the “necessity and importance of developing a discourse of ethics as a *foundation* for the kinds of decisions about classroom knowledge and pedagogy that teachers often face on a daily level” (Giroux 1989, 107, our emphasis).

In a few very provocative contributions to the debate about communicative action and pedagogy, Masschelein (1991a, 1991b, 1994) argues that it is only from the perspective of the intersubjective matrix that the process of subject-production or subject creation is understandable. Intersubjectivity is the prerequisite for subjective acting and understanding. Based on this paradigm of intersubjectivity, he poses the question whether critical pedagogy is really in need of a project, a vision, a utopia, a quasi-transcendental criterion (cf. Masschelein 1991a). If we take democracy and the dialogue really seriously, says Masschelein, then we need not blow up the consensus by quasi-transcendental ideas or vague utopian visions. All citizens in a democracy are supposed to have the possibilities to develop an opinion. This is the concept of democracy as a fact and not as a project! The empty space between human beings (and here Masschelein is referring to Hannah Arendt) should not be filled in before the struggle or before the dialogue. Education and pedagogy must be uncoupled from individual or collective self-realization and self-determination. The empty space, the public sphere, must be its point of reference. The starting point is the irreducible appearance of the plurality of human beings, communicating themselves as absolutely unique human beings (cf. Masschelein 1994).

AN EVALUATION OF CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

By now, it will have become clear that, contrary to the opinion of many, we think that the lack of practical consequences as such is not the main reason for the downfall of critical pedagogy. Nor do we think it justified to dismiss

it solely because it rests on neo-Marxist views that have become unfashionable. We do believe that, as a whole, critical pedagogy does not have the potency to be the successor of other pedagogical paradigms; but this conviction is based on a deficit in its pedagogical ideas, on its belief in the necessity of a consistent identity as the ultimate aim of education.

We do not think identity is a superfluous concept. On the contrary, the pedagogical way of thinking is characterized by the question of the quality of the development of identity or (as it is called in some theories) personhood. In the absence of this perspective, pedagogy degenerates into a sociology of education or a psychology of development. Any pedagogical theory is ultimately about the question of the quality of actorship to be acquired by the educated. For, unless cultural transmission is understood as a totally mechanistic and determined form of socialization (in which case only a bordercase of pedagogical theory remains), the aim of this transmission is always that the child learns to give meaning and act socially in an autonomous way according to her own judgment. Besides the acquisition of competencies, this asks for the development of personal identity: being aware of yourself as a continuously judging and acting person. Without this awareness, rational activity is unthinkable.

The idea that a *consistent* and *uncontradictory* identity is a necessary condition for being an adequate subject as a source of "agency," however, may be characterized as a typical product of modernity. It is part of the image of human beings as striving to emancipate themselves from the coercion of nature and of tradition. The idea of a free and self-aware humanity is the essence of the modernity movement. We can really only see this in the postmodern era, where this premise is no longer taken for granted. This seems to imply, however, that we can also not take for granted the idea of human agency, of the subjective character of human activity. The realization of this agency has until now been considered the ultimate aim of education. Critical pedagogy, for all its emphasis on historicity, has proven itself to be part of the modern way of thinking by adhering to this aim unquestioningly.

This, however, leads to an inconsistency in critical theories of education. If a universal principle is maintained, even as part of a counterfactual ideal, this principle itself is by its very universality placed outside the realm of history, and thus, of politics. Becoming human is, in truth, only partly conceived of as a social and political process. For another part, and it is exactly this part for which critical pedagogy is the cornerstone of education, it is seen either as a "natural" process or (as with Habermas) as a social but universal and thus apolitical process. This implies a tendency to depoliticize all thinking and speaking about the formation of human beings. Fundamental for critical pedagogy is a dualistic conception, in which political circumstances are incidental, but becoming human is universal and thus not really political; in which actual structures of society and personality are discordant, but the ideal for humanity and human society (which Habermas ties to the ideal speech situation) is concordant and free of inconsistencies. It is exactly this dualism which seems problematical and

implausible in the light of postmodern theories. For it implies the existence of knowledge untainted by power.

This leads to the question of whether education can exist at all without the ideal of identity formation. We think the answer must be that we cannot do without the concept of identity, but we do not need the specific interpretation that modernity gives to this concept. It is not only the postmodern philosophers, but also the psychologist and educationalist Vygotsky (if read, that is, in the “semiotic” interpretation inspired by his contemporary Bakhtin), and those he inspired (e.g., Harré and Gillet 1994; Lemke 1995).

A DIRECTION FOR REFORMULATION

The positions just mentioned leave behind them the ideal of a *consistent identity*. Instead, they radicalize Mead’s position that thinking is equal to internalized conversation. Not the individual, but the social situation is the basic element in thinking about humanity. The boundary between inner and outer world does not coincide with the skin, but is situated within the individual. Moreover, it is not a fixed boundary. Individual identity is created again and again, for a short period, in a specific situation, and before a specific public. *Identity is not a given, but an activity, the result of which is always only a local stability*. This activity is not one of balancing between the expectations of others and those of the individual himself. Rather, the balancing act is between different expectations which have each been partly internalized. Within every person there are different voices, which can be, and usually are, contradictory. According to this theory, it is not useful to postulate a separate authority, next to or above such voices, which could coordinate activity from a sort of deepest personal level. Coordination takes place in, and relative to, given social situations. *Identity is not only produced dialogically; it always retains a dialogical character*.

For some commentators of “the postmodern condition,” accepting this model of identity implies that postmodern human beings must be schizophrenics. They hold the fact that under postmodern conditions no stable structures of society exist any more that could ensure identity, responsible for the internal contradictions within the individual. This would imply that at an earlier stage in history, it was possible for individuals to reach a unified identity. In fact, such comments exhibit a nostalgia for harmony, characteristic of the modern, universalistic view of identity. A different interpretation would be that a fixed and stable identity has always been an ideological illusion, the true character of which becomes visible only under current historical conditions. Of course, this does not imply that humans have always been schizophrenic without knowing it. One can only come to that conclusion if one keeps to the accepted view of personal identity. If, however, we are prepared to leave that view, the question becomes why it is that not everybody, even under postmodern conditions, becomes a schizophrenic. If we are to understand identity in a different way, we need a new theory of the *development* of identity.

In short, a theory of the development of identity along Vygotskian lines (cf. Van Oers 1993) would have the following characteristics. First, internalization should not be thought of as a transition from “outside” to “inside.” Rather, it is the transition from what a child can or wants to do in the context of a social activity, “going above itself” in the social relationship, to what she can or wants to do individually and independently. That is, the boundary between the not-yet and the already internalized repertoires lies inside the individual. Such a theory, therefore, does not only deny that something like an “authentic” human subject exists and needs only to be developed; it goes on to deny that the *individual* is an adequate unity from which to understand human identity. Identity becomes understandable only in connection with social relations.

Second, however, the human subject is not understood as just the inevitable product of social factors. It is not the social structures themselves that are internalized, but the *meaning* the individual learns to give to these structures in his interaction with others and in relation to what he has learned before. Internalization is an activity of the giving and incorporation of meaning, not a process of impression in which the individual remains passive. Learning does not mean being fitted with a totally new repertoire of behavior; it consists of qualitative changes in an already existing repertoire. So, the quality of the individual’s meaning-giving *by means* of her environment is at stake. At the same time, learning means learning about oneself: building perspectives on oneself in relation to the learning situations one finds oneself in. This generates a certain continuity, without taking the form of a unified perspective which could be called identity in the accepted sense. In different situations, before different audiences, the individual may be guided by different perspectives which may be partially incompatible. Nor does learning have a definite end; as long as there is contradiction in social relations, learning occurs and identity keeps changing. The theory has a positive attitude toward such change. An individual who does not change anymore is dead, either literally or figuratively. The same is valid for a culture or a society. Not harmony and homeostasis are the ideal here, but continuous change. This holds on the individual level (that is, the individual development does not have an end) as well as on the societal level (we can only speak of “history” if and where development takes place).

In the course of his or her development, each individual learns to handle the facts of change and contradiction in a certain way: either negating them or valuing them negatively, or seeing them as opportunities for development and using them in a positive way. Thus, people learn to manage their own development. Education can play a crucial part here by stimulating certain ways of handling contradictions. The stimulation that Vygotsky-oriented educators offer will go not in the direction of consistency by closedness, but of openness. Contradictions should not be resolved or covered too soon. A “pluralist attitude” (Rang 1993) is an aim of education here. Ideology critique is aimed at situations that impede openness.

Returning to critical pedagogy, it is important to point out that it, too, is aware of contradictions in the individual’s social environment. And in-

sofar as these do not seem present, this situation is regarded with distrust, because this is probably the result of the work of ideology. Still, the reaction of critical pedagogy to such a pluriform situation is different, because it sticks to a “modern” conception of identity. Pluriformity is seen as a temporary and potentially dangerous situation; ideally, identity should be formed by a principle that is either outside that situation or (as with Habermas) in the formal characteristics of interactive situations that transcend their pluriform accidental characteristics.

All this is not to say that critical pedagogy is totally wrong and should be considered superseded by postmodern theories. The intentions of critical pedagogy should be continued in postmodern theory in at least one area. As has been noted before, there is an inherent danger of relativism in postmodernity. If we reject the possibility of a universalist principle for identity formation, are we then left without any point of reference for values and norms, and is education ultimately without legitimation? Many educators have an aversion to postmodern theories for exactly this reason. But it is not an implication of the type of theory proposed here. Rather, such a theory suggests that no *automatic* appeal to natural or transcendent norms or values is possible. This implies that identity formation and the development of the person are seen as thoroughly *political* enterprises, in which the people concerned are responsible for choices made. As we have shown, earlier theories of education have tended to depoliticize such choices, by placing parts of the developmental process outside history. What is needed here is a politics of identity formation that does not take individual decisions as given but makes reference also to historical and societal categories. A postmodern conception that is based on relativism cannot do this, because it also tends to deny history and replace it with mere social change. What is lost is the standard of critique of society, and thus the idea that there is a desirable direction to the development of society and of rationality—which was the central element in critical theory. What a pluralist postmodern theory of education needs is exactly such a theory of the historical genesis of rationality, which speaks to the relationship between the private and the public sphere, between the development of the person and that of society. Biesta (1995) shows that the theory of Rorty on this relation is inadequate to do this job. Another trial, as yet rudimentary and worded in impenetrable Marxist jargon, but based on a Vygotskian view, has been developed by Newman and Holzman (1993). According to them, contemporary society makes it almost impossible to handle contrasts and contradictions in a positive way, because they are covered up or valued negatively. This implies that, in late capitalist society, the development of the person (which they call a “revolutionary activity”) stops at the point where existing structures should be transcended. In their development, human beings are bound to, and made dependent on, the existing structures and cultural elements, which effectively implies the end of history. This, of course, is valued negatively.

Such a theory, however rudimentary, shows that it is both necessary and possible to have a place for ethical questions within a theory that does not recognize universal premises. Such ethical questions are shown to be po-

litical questions at the same time. Pedagogical theory is not made impossible, but it faces the task of reformulating the premises and the aims of education as political questions. At this moment, not many educationists recognize this task. Even those working within a Vygotsky-inspired paradigm do not always conceptualize education and development as political enterprises. (A notable exception is Lemke 1995.)

A reformulation of pedagogical theory in this sense would have to ask what the possibilities are for human beings in the actual political situation *not* to be made totally dependent on existing structures. Put differently, what possibilities are left for humans to become coauthors of the cultural narratives, and what shape should education have to promote this actorship or authorship? A more complete reformulation, however, would take us far beyond the scope of our present discussion.

NOTE

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